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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 024267

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SUBJECT: NEW DOG RULES UNLEASH EMOTIONAL DEBATE IN BEIJING

Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (C) Debate about Beijing's new rules limiting households to one dog and outlawing "big and dangerous" breeds is raging as 2006, the Year of the Dog in the Chinese zodiac calendar, draws to a close. The crackdown on canines has touched off unusual demonstrations on the streets of the capital and has ignited heated exchanges in Internet chat rooms. Contacts told us that the Propaganda Department has banned media outlets from a) criticizing the policy, b) publishing articles about pet regulations in other countries or c) printing pieces that expound on the idea of "harmonious existence" between humans and animals. That the dog policy has become controversial in the first place reflects the poor state of China's civil society, scholars said. The lack of transparency surrounding regulations that affect people's daily lives provokes suspicion and frustration that has no sanctioned outlet. Despite intense feelings on both sides of the dog controls issue, however, experts do not expect it to produce a sustained protest movement. End Summary.

"One-Dog Policy" Elicits Growls

2. (C) The Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau (PSB) and three other city government organs announced a new policy governing dog ownership on November 6. Article 2 of the regulation is the most contentious as it explicitly limits households in most central Beijing districts to one dog and bans keeping so-called "large or dangerous dogs" altogether. (Note: Large dogs are defined as over 35 centimeters tall, while "dangerous" dogs remain unspecified. End note.) The directive also requires rabies vaccinations, introduces leash and curbing laws and identifies "no dog zones" throughout the city. People who own dogs that fail to meet the standards are advised to transfer the pets to special state-run kennels or send them to an area outside of Beijing. The Government has said that controlling an upsurge in rabies cases is a main impetus behind the new measures. Violators of the restrictions can be fined up to RMB 10,000 (about USD 1,250).

3. (C) On November 11, five days after the PSB announcement, some 500 protesters rallied against the new rules near the Beijing Zoo in Xicheng District, an area covered by the one-dog per family restriction. Foreign media reported that police detained some 18 demonstrators. Although we are unaware of plans for further large-scale protests, the dog policy has

clearly touched a nerve in Beijing. On November 29, an orange sedan covered with pro-dog posters rolled through the eastern part of the city, attracting curious stares from passersby. The rules are causing headaches for the police as well, who are supposed to confiscate dogs from owners who can not pay fines, contacts told us. Many police precinct basements are full of dogs, which the police now have to care for themselves.

¶4. (C) Meanwhile, Internet chat rooms have been overflowing with energetic debate about the issue. The website www.bobodogs.com has launched a point-counterpoint forum where supporters and opponents of the dog directive square off about everything from the legitimacy of the rabies threat to what many netizens are calling the "selfishness of urban dog owners." In a typical posting, one opponent of the policy wrote that "the Government should be more tolerant. It should not prohibit people's hobbies just because some people do not like dogs! Speaking of bothering other people, where are the controls on smokers, gamblers, alcoholics and people with bad breath and body odor?" But a chat room participant responded, "Beijing is doing a good job. Dogs are humans' friends? They are only loyal to their owners and attack others!"

The Censors Bite

¶5. (C) Such colorful commentary has been absent from the mainstream Chinese media because the Propaganda Department has issued strict coverage guidelines, said Zhou Qing'an (protect), a free lance journalist who

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regularly contributes to The Beijing News. Media outlets are not permitted to a) criticize the policy, b) publish articles that draw on the experience of other countries in terms of their rules covering dogs and other pets or c) print pieces that expound on the idea of "harmonious existence" between humans and animals (of any kind). Zhou learned No. 3 the hard way. He proposed to The Beijing News that he write a column about human-animal harmony as an indirect criticism of the new rules. Telling him about the Propaganda guidelines, an editor shot down his storyline.

An Uncivil Society

¶6. (C) The controversy surrounding the one-dog policy reflects the underdevelopment of China's civil society, claimed Li Dun, a professor at Tsinghua's Center for the Study of Contemporary China. Cities in rules-based countries have leash and curbing laws that developed in a transparent way over time, Li said. By contrast, no one knows the origin of Beijing's new directive, leaving ample space for rumors and speculation. The root of the restrictions is probably a disagreement between dog owners and petless neighbors, Li surmised. Unable to settle matters among themselves and with no trust in the ability of the court system to hash things out equitably, the aggrieved probably reached as high as they could for influential connections to get results, Li theorized. Rumors are circulating, he related, that former President Jiang Zemin even sent a letter on the subject of dog controls to President Hu Jintao. "How could something that should be handled locally wind up on the desk of a top leader?" he asked.

¶7. (C) In this vein, Li said he and most observers doubt that any genuine link exists between the new regulations and a serious public health threat from

rabies. The proportion of people who die of rabies, let alone who are bitten by dogs, is very small, Li remarked. He cited improving traffic safety as a much more urgent task facing the Government. Official statistics bear him out. According to the Ministry of Health, 2,545 people died of rabies in 2005 compared to nearly 100,000 who were killed in traffic accidents. In addition, during the first 10 months of 2006, 1,866 people died of rabies. At that rate, the number of rabies deaths in China will decline to about 2,240 this year.

Frayed Social Fabric?

18. (C) The new restrictions appear to mostly affect dog owners among poorer families, the working class and the elderly, said Victor Yuan (protect), president of the public opinion polling firm Horizon and a longtime Embassy contact. Middle class and richer individuals can pay the fines (or bribes) necessary to keep their unsanctioned pets. But Yuan said his informal research indicates that passions on the dog issue, pro and con, are running high across class lines. He Jiangtao (protect), a journalist at Citizen Magazine, separately made a similar point, adding that in his view there has been a social cost. The PSB notice announcing the regulations included telephone numbers the public could dial to report scofflaws. The official encouragement to inform on others about their dogs, said He, is uncomfortably reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution period when the pervasive lack of trust all but unraveled China's social fabric.

19. (C) Nonetheless, Yuan of Horizon discounted the possibility that a cohesive protest movement will emerge to advocate on behalf of harried dog owners. "People have a hard enough time mobilizing their residents committees to demand services from their building management," Yuan said. Yuan added that he has talked to National People's Congress deputies who believe the new regulations are oversimplified and inapplicable to concerns about public health and pet registration. He predicted that when the NPC convenes in March, the body will produce new legislation that is less draconian. Failing that, Yuan forecast that the trajectory of the directive would be akin to that of the 1993 law banning fireworks. After an initial crackdown, enforcement became increasingly lax and people started to ignore the rules. Then the Government repealed the law entirely in late 2005.

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